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Essay
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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN A THEORY OF WAR

Prepared by

Lt Col Jaime Vazquez, USAF

NWC Seminar D

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War is a very complex phenomena involving every component of a nation-state; its people, its government, and in particular, its armed forces. As such, all of these components experience the effects of war and they are all responsible for the conduct and outcome of it. Consequently, for a theory of war to be effective and comprehensive, it must address the concerns of each of these participants. In order to accomplish this, I argue that a theory of war should include the following essential elements: the nature of war, the medium in which war takes place, and the levels of war. These elements should be understood by all, but especially so by the military commander, in whose realm (the battlefield) war is ultimately decided.

NATURE OF WAR

The most basic element of a theory of war is an understanding of the nature of war. This understanding must be developed on the basis of two distinct but inseparable characteristics of war. War must be understood from the perspective of the violence inherent in its execution and from that of the controls applied to it by human society. I start from the premise that fighting is an indispensable ingredient in war. Fighting, as a component of war, brings to fore man's most vivid manifestation of hostility. It is done with passion and it carries in it a clear intent to cause harm and suffering to the adversary. With this in mind, the opposing forces arm themselves with the number and types of weapons that would hopefully give them the advantage. Through the act of war, nation-states, their people and leaders, channel their ambitions, envies, love for power and other similar emotions. In war, the

defeat of the enemy becomes an obsession, because in the potential for victory resides the ability of the victorious side to impose its will on the opponent.

However, hostile feelings and intentions are not the only essence of war, for this would have meant that humanity has not evolved from the age of savagery. The fact is that mankind has seen the need to organize itself into institutions that guide and regulate its behavior. These controls bring purpose to human activities such as war and are an essential consideration in understanding these human ventures. In essence, war has become a civilized activity where the degree of confrontation is measured by the objective that it aims to achieve and this objective emanates from the will of the people, interpreted and promulgated by the government.

For the military commander, as the executioner of this act of violence, an understanding of these factors is of paramount importance. He does not have absolute freedom of action in conducting the war. His strategy must conform to the parameters established by the national policy objective, because any deviations may run contrary to broader political considerations outside of the commander's sphere of knowledge and concern. An attitude of neglect in this regard could have negative consequences on the battlefield, because it may weaken the effects of the other tools of foreign policy that can be brought to bear against the enemy. Similarly, it is imperative that the commander understand the nature of war not only as it relates to the troops he commands, so that he can incite them for optimum performance, but also as it

relates to the enemy. He must be able to factor his perception of the enemy's view of war into his plans and operations so that he can execute the appropriate option at the right time to have the desired effect. A naval blockade, an aerial bombing raid, or an artillery barrage may have different effects on the will of the enemy depending on a multitude of factors, but the commander must be able to capitalize on his knowledge of the adversary to achieve his objective.

THE MEDIUM

The most vibrant element in a theory of war is the medium in which it takes place, for it is here that the "rubber meets the ramp." From a strategic point of view, this medium incorporates the larger scope of activities within a war, the domain of Clausewitz' trinity, where the people, its government, and the armed forces form the totality of a state at war. From the military perspective, the medium is generally associated with the battlefield and the employment of armed forces for the conduct of military operations, where physical and moral factors, as well as the unpredictable come into play. This distinction is extremely important, because it emphasizes the more complex nature of the war environment.

The trinity sets in motion the dynamics of an inter-dependability and subordination that must remain clear in the minds of every military commander. The government derives its strength from the expressed will of the people, which it interprets to formulate policy and direct the activities of its armed forces. The success of any war is highly dependent on this relationship and

how well each player performs its role. The government must succeed in grasping the essence and aspirations of its people or run the risk of engaging in a war doomed to failure because of lack of public support, as was the case for the United States in Vietnam. The military must remain the loyal servant that provides the professional advice about the conduct of war and executes military operations on the battlefield to support the established policy objectives.

In terms of the battlefield, a theory of war must reflect the enormous importance that a thorough understanding of the concept of the center of gravity within the enemy's trinity represents for the military commander. The determination of this "hub of all power and movement," as Clausewitz describes it, is perhaps the most significant endeavor for the military commander. It is so, because once identified, it provides him with the focus for his strategy, the aim of his main efforts. Not recognizing the center of gravity, however, could have detrimental effects on the overall results of the war, as the war may proceed aimlessly, debilitating the foundations within the trinity that gave it purpose, strength, and direction. This demands the military commander's fullest understanding of the enemy's trinity, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as his own, because in his dual role of combatant and advisor, he can actually influence this determination.

The military commander's prosecution of the war on the battlefield can also be affected by the physical and moral factors that may impact on his operations or those of his opponents. He

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must develop a sense of his own strengths and those of his adversary in terms of the fighting spirit, the stamina, and the capabilities on each side. Such knowledge needs to be a critical ingredient of the general strategy as well as of all military operations. A theory of war must respond to this need of the commander.

Equally important is the consideration of the concept of friction, uncertainty and chance in war. An understanding of the medium is incomplete without this. Things seldom happen as planned, and with the intensity of activities in war, the unexpected can always occur. This condition creates the need for flexibility on the part of the commander and his effectiveness in doing so could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

LEVELS OF WAR

Once the political leadership of a state becomes committed to the use of war in defense of its national interests, I believe the most fundamental decision remaining relates to the type of war that best meets the provocation. The leadership must decide whether to engage in an all out effort to achieve total defeat of the enemy, or to limit the scope of activities for the purpose of obtaining only certain favorable conditions for a peaceful settlement. This decision is extremely critical, because a miscalculation may throw the country into the path of its own defeat. As Clausewitz argued, the level of war must respond to the conditions and motivations that precipitated the confrontation. In other words, it must correspond to the policy objective for which it was conceived and it must also take into account the enemy's motives. These two

factors, coupled with an assessment of the capabilities of both sides to wage war, should determine the kind of war to be pursued, the level of force required for this purpose, and the level of commitment required by the nation-state.

Here is where I think that the intellectual skill of the military commander is put to its maximum test as an advisor and as a planner. He must be able to distance himself from the anxieties of the conflict and analyze the situation from the perspective of the enemy to determine what motivates him (the enemy) and how far this motivation will sustain his opposition on the battlefield. Because, even if the enemy's military capabilities are limited, his objective and resolve to achieve it may be capable of magnifying his military prowess, as is the case in many revolutionary wars. If the commander is able to understand the situation from this perspective, then he becomes better prepared to posture his forces for combat and to advise his political leaders on the strategic conduct of the war.

In conclusion, the outstanding military commander truly understands the nature of war, is fully aware of the intricacies of the war environment, and realizes the relevance of the spectrum of war. In so doing, he increases his effectiveness in the field, enhances his ability to advise his political leaders and excels in protecting and defending the needs of the people. A comprehensive theory of war promotes and provokes such levels of performance.